

“If Opportunity Doesn’t Knock, Build a Door”: An Interpretation of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

The novel *The Old Man and The Sea* is a masterpiece by an American novelist Ernest Hemingway published in 1952. The universal significance of the novel lies in the fact that it deals with the themes of hope, endurance and struggle. The novel is an inspiration for everyman to be active, committed and devoted to his work. Hemingway, through his code-hero Santiago, conveys a message that a man should dare, endure, stick to the rules and persist when he is defeated and thwarted in order to achieve success in his life, no matter how old and unlucky he is. The old man’s story infuses a spirit of hope and struggle in everyman. “A man can be destroyed, but not defeated” is the main theme around which revolves the whole story. The paper attempts to analyse and interpret the novel in the light of this theme and other themes of hope, struggle and endurance the novel is replete with and to show the significance of all these things in one’s life.

Keywords: Hope, endurance, struggle, life, success, work.

Introduction

“If opportunity doesn’t knock, build a door”, is a famous quote by an American comedian Milton Berle. The quote means if one doesn’t get what he wants to get in his life, he should make an initiative and work hard to create such circumstances that the opportunities itself coming him to knock the door. To put it in other words, we can say that unless and until a person works hard or dedicates himself truly to something he longs for in his life, he will not get it at all. This can also be interpreted as if fate or luck doesn’t favour a person he can change his fate or destiny by working hard. The quote is an inspirational to all humans and the nub of the quote is action. Human life is all about a struggle and it inspires everyone to be active. Without action one can’t get success or his dreams fulfilled in his real life. Here “opportunity” refers to dreams, goals of one’s life, and “build a door” means working hard, to make oneself eligible for that goal first. The quote has got universal significance and is applicable to all in the universe, depending upon their field/sphere of life they are associated with such as art, business, literature, marketing, industry, agriculture, so on and so forth. “A dream doesn’t become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination and hard work” (Colin Powell). Thus it inspires all to be dedicative, active, patient and courageous in their respective spheres of life.

The novel *The Old Man and the Sea* is a masterpiece by an American novelist Ernest Hemingway, published in 1952. The novel got an immediate popularity and recognition soon after it was published. It got Hemingway two big literary prizes in two successive years – Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and the world’s most prestigious Nobel Prize in literature in 1954. The novel is an epic story of man’s struggle against the over whelming powers of life. It is the story of human courage, endurance, and experience in life. It tells the story of man vs. nature and his triumph against the whims and odds of nature. A man must work hard and struggle in life in order to get success and to turn his dreams into reality for human life is all about a struggle. Milton’s quote “If opportunity doesn’t knock, build a door” befits here in Hemingway’s novel.

The novel narrates the story of the old man named Santiago who is an experienced fisherman and who catches fish in the Gulf Stream, off the Havana Coast. But being an unfortunate fisherman, he is unable to catch a fish for eighty four days. Other fishermen coming back with a fish daily ridicule him and mock at him. But the old man doesn’t lose his hope and confidence. He continues to strive and struggle throughout his life to get his success. Though he is now too old for fishing, his determination and dedication reflect the man’s struggle in life and inspire everyone to play an active role in his life. Being a great artist he dedicates his whole life to his art. He doesn’t want to miss a single opportunity, come what may. The old man says:

“I keep them with precision only I have no luck anymore. But who knows? May be today. Everyday is a new day. It better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready.” (25)

Although he knows he is unlucky, he doesn’t give up trying his luck to the end. Even the parents of a small boy called Manolin, who sent the boy with him for fishing, withdraw their son from him after he has not been able to catch any fish for the first forty days and sends him with other fishermen who come back their homes with a fish daily. People call him a “Salao” the worst form of unlucky. Afterwards he continues to go without a fish for another forty four days but he doesn’t give up his hope at all.

After eighty four days of sufferings, he is able to catch a great fish called Marlin. And here it is not the old man’s success, but Santiago’s struggle with Marlin and with the sharks to defend the Marlin all alone which is more important and worth mentioning. The old man fights a battle of endurance and courage for two days and two nights against the powers of giant Marlin. On the third day, he is able to kill the marlin with his harpoon. On the first sight of the fish, the old man tells the fish, “But I will kill you dead before this day ends” (45). This reflects the old man’s self confidence and his courage and strength. The most important thing inside the old man is his resolution and great determination that enables him to win over the great fish. In the novel, he often makes resolute comparisons while struggling with the fish: “Let him think I am more man than I am, and I will be so” (54). At another place the old man says, “I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures” (55).

Santiago feels so tired physically after struggling with the fish for two days and two nights but he doesn’t care at all. He experiences a sense of pain in his whole body but he doesn’t heed any attention to for his success is more important than his life. As he says, “And pain does not matter

to a man”(72). Again, he says, “You are killing me fish, the old man thought....Come on and kill me. I don’t care who kills who” (79). All this renders his power to withstand hardship and stress.

The old man’s epic fight against the sharks to defend the marlin while returning to home also shows his great and heroic courage and endurance. How the sharks come to attack him and how the old man succeeds in defeating them by killing one by one is quite well interesting and thrilling. When the first shark, a very big Mako, attacks him, the old man uses all his strength to strike the harpoon down on the head of the shark. But it takes away about forty pounds of the dead marlin’s flesh and his harpoon too before he is able to kill the shark. After some time, two more sharks come together to attack the marlin but before he is able to kill them, they snatch away a quarter of the best meat off the marlin. The sharks continue to come in packs to attack the dead marlin. The old man loses his weapon one by one while fighting with the sharks. He has made up his mind to fight till the end, although he knows quite well that he is fighting a losing battle: “Fight them”, he said, “I’ll fight them until I die” (100).

Although he returns with no fish and brings home nothing but a huge skeleton, he is not disappointed at all. He knows that he is finally beaten by the sharks but he is not broken. It is not his win or loss but his epic fight and struggle that counts and that is more important than the reward. He is deprived of the prize he has got but still he feels happy and satisfied for he has made every possible effort he could. He is already paid for his hard work; no matter he couldn’t protect his coveted prize from the sharks and bring it to his home.

Conclusion

The Old Man and the Sea reflects that human life is struggle. Its main focus is on human action. A man cannot succeed in life unless and until he will work hard. Santiago in the novel is an example of everyman who dedicates his life wholly and solely to his art in order to get success. His life presents the human courage, endurance and patience. Through the old man, Santiago, Hemingway presents the main theme of the novel that, “A man can be destroyed, but not defeated”. His struggle in the sea all alone with the marlin and with the sharks reflects the human courage and endurance and shows a man’s ability to face and defeat the hardships of life. The novel shows “what a man can do and what a man can endure.” A man can change his fate or luck by working hard. Santiago, whom luck doesn’t favour at all, has changed his lot by going out to the sea everyday with a new hope and has achieved a great success ever. Allama Iqbal, a great Urdu poet and philosopher, also stressed on hard work and dedication in one’s life in order to achieve success and to make his fate better. He says:

Khudi Ko Kar Blund Itna Ki Har Taqdeer Se Phele,

Khuda Bande Se Khud Puche Bata Teri Raza Kya Hai (Bal-e-Jibril)

In Translation it means:

Develop the self so that before every decree

God will ascertain from you: “What is your wish?”

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